The ring forms of all four species are very similar and difficult to distinguish. *P. falciparum* rings tend to be a little smaller and more numerous than the other species. The presence of a large number of rings in the absence of more mature stages, as well as multiply-infected erythrocytes, is highly suggestive of *P. falciparum*. Erythrocytes infected with *P. vivax* and *P. ovale* are enlarged and exhibit Schüffner's dots as the rings mature into trophozoites. The trophozoites of *P. vivax* are often ameboid, whereas *P. ovale* tends to be more compact. The *P. malariae* trophozoite is very compact and the host erythrocyte is not enlarged. Mature asexual forms of *P.*
*falciparum* are rarely found in the peripheral circulation. The typical number of merozoites produced per schizont is: *P. vivax* 14-20 (up to 24), *P. ovale* 6-12 (up to 18), *P. malariae* 8-10 (up to 12), and *P. falciparum* 16-24 (up to 36). *P. falciparum* exhibits crescent-shaped gametocytes whereas the other species are all round to oval. *P. vivax* and *P. ovale* gametocytes are in enlarged erythrocytes with Schüffner's dots and are difficult to distinguish from each other. *P. malariae* gametocytes do not modify the host erythrocyte. Gametocytes can be distinguished from trophozoites by their large size (nearly filling the erythrocyte) and a single nucleus. Mature microgametocytes tend to stain lighter than macrogametocytes and have a more diffuse nucleus.